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Middle East synod is unique, and here's why

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NCR Today

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In broad strokes, one Synod of Bishops in Rome is pretty much like another one — the same procedures, the same structures, often the same faces and same issues. Yet there are several features which make the Oct. 10-24 Synod for the Middle East unique, which were highlighted this morning by Archbishop Nikola Eterovi?, a Croat who heads the Vatican department for synods of bishops, in a briefing for reporters.

Read NCR's full coverage of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East: Index of stories from the Synod.

Ad orientem

For one thing, this is clearly a synod *ad orientem*, meaning directed to the East. Of the 185 bishops taking part (out of a total of some 270 participants), 140 come from the 22 Eastern Catholic churches in union with Rome, meaning that just 45 represent the Latin Rite. In most synods, the bishops and other participants from the East are almost a footnote — this time around, they're the main act.

That's because the Christian presence in the nations which make up the Middle East is dominated by the Eastern churches, including both the Orthodox churches and those in union with Rome: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Cyprus, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Syria, Turkey, Palestinian Territories, and Yemen.

Eterovi? said this morning that the region encompasses 356,174,000 people, of whom 5,707,000 are Catholics, representing 1.6 percent of the population. The total Christian presence in the Middle East is

about 20,000,000, or 5.6 percent, he said.

The Synod for the Middle East will mark the first time that basically all the bishops of the Middle East have met with the pope as a group. As usual, Benedict XVI is expected to take part in most of the working sessions of the synod, and will likely make his own presentation at roughly the midway point.

Brevity is the soul of wit

Another distinguishing feature of the Synod for the Middle East is its brevity. Under John Paul, Synods of Bishops typically ran for almost a month. That generated grumbling about bishops being out of their dioceses for too long, not to mention foot-dragging during the event itself, so under Benedict XVI the synods have been trimmed back to three weeks.

This synod, however, is being packed confined to just 14 days, or two weeks. Back in 1995, John Paul assembled a special edition of the Synod of Bishops entirely focused on Lebanon, and that took a full 19 days. This time the entire region is under consideration, in a shorter span of time.

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Terovi explained the logic for the brevity this way: "Considering the rather complex situation in the Middle Eastern countries," he said, "we do not want to keep the shepherds from their flocks for too long."

The irony of this compressed working calendar is that arguably the most complex thicket of questions ever taken up by a Synod of Bishops — the political, religious, and cultural future of the Middle East — will get the least amount of time. Especially given the tight calendar, it's probably most realistic to assume that the synod will more often raise questions than answer them.

Arabic and ad honorem

For the first time, Arabic will be an official working language of the Synod of Bishops, reflecting the fact that it's the most widely spoken language of the Christians of the region. During the 1995 synod on Lebanon, the official language was French, even if Arabic was spoken on the floor of the meeting.

There will also be two working groups in Arabic, along with the usual groups in the major European languages.

Also for the first time, the pope has appointed two "honorary" presidents of the synod: Cardinal Nasrallah Sfeir, the 90-year-old Patriarch of the Maronites, and Cardinal Emmanuel III Delly, the 83-year-old Patriarch of the Chaldeans in Iraq. The idea is to honor Sfeir and Delly, along with their churches, without expecting to them to preside over daily sessions and handle the other duties of the presidents.

Those tasks fall to the two "working" presidents of the synod: Patriarch Ignace Joseph III Younan of Antioch, Syria, and Cardinal Leonardo Sandri of the Vatican's Congregation for Eastern Churches.

Muslims and Jews

In the past, Synods of Bishops were basically intra-Catholic affairs, though with some "fraternal delegates" from other Christian churches as observers. Benedict XVI broke that mold in 2008, for the first time inviting a Jewish representative to address the bishops: Rabbi Shear-Yashuv Cohen, the Grand Rabbi of Haifa, spoke at the Synod on the Bible.

†This time, another synod first will be recorded. Not only will a Jewish leader address the bishops, but so will representatives of both the Sunni and Shi'ite branches of Islam. (Globally, roughly 80 percent of the 1.6 billion Muslims in the world are Sunnis, but the Shi'ite population is heavily concentrated in the Middle East, especially the Persian Gulf region centering on Iran.)

On October 13, Rabbi David Rosen, adviser to Israel's Chief Rabbinate and interreligious affairs director for the American Jewish Committee, will speak to the bishops. The next day, both the Grand Mufti of Beirut Mohammed al-Sammak, a Sunni, and Ayatollah Sayed Mostafa Muhagag Ahmadabadi, a professor of Islamic Law at Teheran University and a Shi'ite, will speak.

Americans

†Though the focus in this Synod of Bishops is on prelates from the Middle East, plenty of Americans will be involved.

†Two American prelates will be at the synod by virtue of their roles as Vatican officials: Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Archbishop Raymond Burke, Prefect of the Apostolic Signatura. Burke will sit on the "commission for controversies" at the synod, which is the functional equivalent of a "rules committee" in a legislature that deals with procedural disputes.

†Cardinal John Foley, Grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre, is a synod member by papal appointment. The longtime president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications and Philadelphia native will also preside over the synod's "Commission for Information," which handles media relations.

†Two Americans will represent the U.S. bishops' conference at the synod: Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles and Archbishop Allen Vigneron of Detroit. Both Los Angeles and Detroit are areas of the country with high concentrations of Catholics from the Middle East.

†Two other Americans are among the experts at the synod: Monsignor Robert Stern from the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, and Benedictine Fr. Mark Sheridan, former rector and dean of the theology faculty at the Benedictine-run College of Sant'Anselmo in Rome, now representing the International Association for Coptic Studies.

†Finally, several bishops from the Eastern churches responsible for their diaspora in the United States will be at the synod. They include:

- †Archbishop Cyrille Salim Bustros, Melkites (Newton, Mass.)
- †Bishop Yousif Benham Habash, Syrians (Newark)
- †Bishop Robert Joseph Shaheen, Maronites (Los Angeles)
- †Bishop Gregory John Mansour, Maronites (Brooklyn)
- †Bishop Sarhad Yawsip Hermiz Jammo, Chaldeans (San Diego)
- †Bishop Ibrahim Namu Ibrahim, Chaldeans (Detroit)
- †Bishop Manuel Batakian, Armenians (New York)

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